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ABSTRACT

Psychologists who are interested in the nature of ideology and the achievement of social change generally focus their primary theoretical and empirical attention on those people outside academia who are trying to change or to prevent change in one political sphere or another. There may be some value in looking at psychology and psychologists as well to better understand the impact of ideology in psychological research. A number of psychologists in recent years have convincingly pointed out a variety of ideological assumptions, commonly accepted in academic psychology, that are related to the positivist philosophical justifications for experimental, quantitative research; the focus on the individual rather than the structural level of change; and the liberal, rather than conservative or radical political orientation of psychological theory. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the consequences for psychologists of the widespread acceptance of these assumptions, particularly as they interact with career pressures and, also, to consider the prospects for social and ideological change within psychology. (Author/IS)

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Achieving Ideological Change Within Psychology

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Paper presented as part of a symposium on Psychology, Ideology, and Social Change at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May 1985.

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Abstract

As psychologists interested in the nature of ideology and the achievement of social change, we generally focus our primary theoretical and empirical attention on those people "out there" who are trying to change--or to prevent change--in one political sphere or another. There may be some value in briefly turning our attention instead to ourselves. A number of psychologists in recent years have convincingly pointed out a variety of ideological assumptions, commonly accepted in academic psychology, that are related to the positivist philosophical justifications for experimental, quantitative research, the focus on the individual rather than the structural level of change, and the liberal (rather than conservative or radical) political orientation of psychological theory. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of the consequences for psychologists of the widespread acceptance of these assumptions, particularly as they interact with academic career pressures and, also, to consider the prospects for social and ideological change within psychology.

Achieving Ideological Change Within Psychology

As psychologists interested in both the nature of political ideology and the achievement of social change, we generally focus our primary attention on those people "out there" who are trying to change--or to prevent change--in one political sphere or another. We look at members of the Nuclear Freeze Movement or members of the decisionmaking levels of government in order to gain some insight into how to prevent nuclear war. We study people in groups such as the Moral Majority or the Communist Party in order to learn more about the nature and role of ideology. Sometimes we even do experimental research designed to help those political or community forces with which we happen to agree attain their objectives more easily.

These different approaches demonstrate the fact that the line between academic objectivity and political advocacy has become increasingly blurry in recent years. Although there are still psychologists who maintain that the sole purpose of social science is to amass objective data rather than to bring about social change, in general there has been greater awareness that value-free objectivity is not possible and that attempts to maintain an objective stance simply serve the purposes of those who benefit from the prevailing ideological positions in society (see, for example, Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Fox, 1985; Rein, 1976; Sarason, 1981).

The increased willingness to openly advocate political change <u>as psychologists</u>, <u>on psychological grounds</u>, has been, in part, a result of these changing notions of the nature of social science. It has also come about because of the widespread perception that time is running out--that in trying to be objective about issues such as nuclear war (e.g, Frank, 1967) or environmental degradation (e.g., Moos & Brownstein, 1979) we may satisfy purist definitions of the purpose of science while standing in the way of actually

arriving at real-world solutions. Of course, recent debates in the APA Monitor about the degree to which the American Psychological Association should engage in political advocacy (see Payton, 1984) demonstrate that, even today, not all of us share the view that psychologists in general have a responsibility to turn part of their concerns in politically relevant directions.

Even as we try to get a handle on the role of ideology in the political world, on the most effective methods for bringing about social change, and on the appropriate place for psychologists in political advocacy, there may be some value in briefly turning our attention away from the people that we normally interview, experiment on, and theorize about in order to consider ourselves. When we apply our analyses of the function and consequences of political ideology to the field of psychology, several interesting questions are raised. How, for example, does psychology's own prevailing ideology affect the work of psychologists? And, perhaps a more practical question for those of us on the fringes of mainstream psychology, what are the prospects for significant change within our own field, given the tendency on the part of the powers that be in any institution to dismiss as irrational, impractical, or downright subversive any criticism designed to change the status quo?

That psychology has a prevailing ideology is taken for granted here. Seymour Sarason (1981), Nathan Caplan and Stephen Nelson (1973), Edward Sampson (1977, 1981), Rom Harré (Harré & Secord, 1972; Harré, 1980), and many others have, in recent years, convincingly pointed out a number of assumptions commonly accepted in American academic psychology, particularly in social psychology. Such assumptions cover a wide range. They include, among other things, the view that the purpose of social science is to determine causality (a positivist view) rather than to attain understanding (a phenomenological view); that the combination of experimentation and quantification is, ultimately, the only

respectable scientific method; that the psychologist's focus on the individual level of analysis is more important than the more global levels examined by sociologists or anthropologists; that specialization within the field is not only necessary but preferable; that psychology has actually achieved a significant body of knowledge that is useful in bringing about improvements in society; that this increased knowledge supports a liberal rather than a conservative or radical political perspective; and that individual change rather than institutional change is the preferred focus of research. Now, all these individual points may or may not actually be correct; my primary purpose here is not to evaluate their validity but to consider some of the consequences for academic psychologists of their widespread acceptance and to speculate on prospects for achieving ideological change within our own field.

I will return throughout the rest of this paper to the topic of qualitative methodology, a topic that has received some increased attention in recent years within social psychology as well as in other disciplines, and one that is linked to a number of ideological and practical issues. I should say at the outset that my own interest in increasing the acceptability of qualitative methods stems from my belief that there is more to the subject matter of social psychology than can, or should, be examined in the laboratory. According to Gordon Allport (1968), social psychology had its origins in political philosophy, and an examination of social psychology textbooks written half a century ago makes it clear that social psychological theory was widely seen as relevant to important political concerns. The increased American tendency to turn social psychology into a purely experimental science removed much of the overt political content, resulting in the situation wherein many undergraduates, who originally become interested in social psychology partly in the belief that the field provides a way to learn how to deal with important social problems,

lose their interest as they are pressured to conform to the dictates of the laboratory. Such pressures, I would argue, are a result of social psychology's own particular ideology, an ideology that dismisses studies that use alternative methodologies as "exploratory" and, by implication, not very important.

Research using some combination of small sample size, unstructured open-ended interviewing or participant observation, egalitarian researcher-subject interaction, general informality, and other such components frequently advocated in the qualitative literature has long been common in psychology, though it has often been controversial. Allport (1965) insisted on the importance of the idiographic approach, which focuses on individual patterns, in contrast to a total reliance on nomothetic approaches designed to find general laws; both are important, he maintained, and the idiographic concern with understanding the particular event or person should not be dismissed in the search for generalizations. In general, qualitative researchers agree with sociologist John Lofland's (1971) remark that "one legitimately sacrifices breadth for depth" (p. 91); the anthropologist Michael Agar (1980) added that "it is hardly your fault that dozens of variables are relevant to the issue. Better to understand their interrelationship in a few cases than to misunderstand three of them in a population of 500" (p. 123).

Qualitative interviews have been used to one degree or another by a wide range of researchers. Gilligan (1982) compared the differing nature of morality among women and men; Sennett and Cobb (1972) examined working class consciousness; Kelman (1983) analyzed Yasser Arafat's cognitive style during two long conversational interviews; Wikler (1982) studied the concerns of Vietnam veterans; Kitwood (1980) interviewed adolescents about a range of value issues. In these and many other examples, the researchers tried to understand the phenomena they were interested in from the perspective of the people studied

as well as from their own analytical framework, and found the openended interview to be a useful--even a necessary--part of the process. That such an approach is often used, however, does not negate the fact that it often looked down upon, given the field's ideological preference for quantitative, experimental methods.

Some Consequences of Psychology's Ideology

The framework for understanding ideology presented by Wrigley (1985) can usefully be applied at this point. To begin with, psychology's ideological assumptions--the central beliefs I outlined above that serve as the standards by which the work of psychologists is evaluated--are adhered to with varying degrees of dogmatism and flexibility. Within the mainstream, in fact, alternatives to the central assumptions used to be heard so infrequently that the failure of many psychologists to consider them may have come less from a dogmatic cognitive style than from a lack of awareness that such alternatives existed. Such indeed was the case for qualitative methods; the use of quantitative, experimental methods has long been taken for granted as the approach that stands at the pinnacle of true science, and many psychologists were trained without ever being forced to consider the validity of rational arguments in favor of nonexperimental, nonquantitative research. Today, however, after more than a decade of discussion of "paradigm shifts" and "the crisis of social psychology," the rapidly increasing literature on qualitative research and closely related concerns--including theoretical defenses, handbooks of methodological variations, and research reports--makes such a lack of awareness less justifiable than it might have been a decade ago (for example, see De Rivera, 1984; Ginsburg, 1979; Kitwood, 1980; Kroger, 1982; Patton, 1980; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Roberts, 1981; Rubin, 1983).

Of course, psychologists who do consider alternatives to the dominant

ideology may still reject those alternatives after looking at the evidence they think is relevant. It should be remembered, though, that decisions about what counts as evidence are also affected by ideology. Some would argue that there is in fact no objective truth to be found at all, that the selection of methods and the interpretation of findings are value-relevant rather than fact-relevant; thus, the choice between qualitative and quantitative methods may have more to do with the personal inclinations of the chooser than it does with some ultimately knowable evaluation of each method's supposed effectiveness. Others would argue instead that, as Eric Hoffer (1951) put it in The True Believer, the very purpose of a doctrine is "to interpose a fact-proof screen between the faithful and the realities of the world" (p. 75), resulting in a situation wherein those who are embedded in an institutional framework are not in the best position to provide an objective analysis. And when criticism of the field does come from outside the framework--from philosophy, say, or from sociology--the tendency is to reject it, either because it seems to come with its own fact-proof screen that is clearly at odds with our own, or because it is written in its own (rather than our own) jargon, one to which most of us are not accustomed (particularly those of us trained in these days of narrow specialization).

The several varieties of qualitative methodology and other related approaches have emerged from conceptions of science that differ markedly from the positivist assumptions of most social scientists; those who seek to understand the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research (or, in fact, even of the more typical quantitative approach) are forced to seek out material in a discipline that has a different--and difficult--mode of discourse. It is far simpler to charge proponents of alternative approaches with ideological bias, particularly those whose methods seem linked to a specific political perspective such as feminism (Roberts, 1981), Marxism (Wexler, 1983),

or anarchism (Orenstein & Luken, 1978), but such a reaction ignores the view that adherents of the dominant paradigm are similarly embedded in their own limiting ideology.

An important factor in the continued acceptance of psychology's status quo is this simple tendency to stick to what we are used to--what we are recognized specialists in--in theory, in method, and in goals. We continue to follow those methods that we are already using at least partly because to consider making any changes would disrupt our comforting, ideologically narrowed view of the world. It is easier to go on assuming that what we have learned in our own methods classes is the only rational way of dealing with psychological phenomena than it would be to seriously make our way through uncharted waters. "Unfortunately," as De Rivera (1984, p. 682) put it, "while most psychologists understand multivariate analysis, they do not understand the discipline of qualitative description." So we justify to ourselves and to our students the only goals and methods that we have been taught are respectable, dismissing alternatives as "not science."

I think it also must be said that most of us learn fairly quickly that it's not a good idea to rock the boat. By happy coincidence, those goals and methods that we've learned to consider intellectually acceptable turn out to be the goals and methods that are most likely to help us find a job or reach tenure in the crowded halls of academia; as De Rivera (1984) pointed out, "it is difficult to get qualitative work published in the journals of the American Psychological Association, and all but impossible to get such work funded" (p. 682). Academic job pressures interact with the dominant ideology in a circular relationship that has an enormous impact both on the nature of scholarship and on our personal lives. Our belief in the ultimate social value of narrow, experimental research that endlessly adds minor variations to a few major themes

is used to justify our amazing output of publications which, as it happens, helps us to stand out from the rest of the pack when job decisions are made. We have more reasons to believe in what we're doing than the mythic ideals of the scientific method.

Wrigley's discussion of the penalties of ideology--the blunders of political leadership--has its relevance here as well. As we select our research topics because of their place in our overall dominant central belief system as well as because of their ability to quickly add a large number of articles to our curriculum vitae, we tend to avoid topics that might take too long to be practical in a crowded job market. The fact is that qualitative research done properly takes a very long time, and many months or even years of labor-intensive effort are required before the results are "publishable." Many graduate students and assistant professors who acknowledge the benefits of qualitative research quite reasonably admit they do not plan on doing any until after they have attained tenure. So not only do we fail to look at potentially significant topics with more relevance to social problems than to laboratory facsimiles, but we add to what Sanford (1982) called the "fragmented, overspecialized, method centered, and dull" (p. 902) literature, a literature that makes it even more difficult to gain an adequate interdisciplinary perspective on larger social problems. The manner in which the single-minded drive for publication-based tenure channels research interests away from potentially useful areas strikes me as a corruption of tenure's original purpose of protecting academic freedom.

I don't mean to imply that social psychology is the only field in which an academic ideology is used to justify the pragmatic surrender to competitive career pressures. I have noted elsewhere (Fox, 1984) that such a vicious circle is widespread throughout academic life. Lewis Hyde (1983), for example, a poet

and social observer, had this to say about the sciences in general:

> It is precisely when people work with no goal other than that of attracting a better job, or getting tenure or higher rank, that one finds specious and trivial research, not contributions to knowledge. When there is a marked competition for jobs and money, when such supposedly secondary goals become primary, more and more scientists will be pulled into the race to hurry "original" work into print, no matter how extraneous to the wider goals of the community. (p. 83)

Hyde went on to add that,

> In the literary community, at least in the last few decades, the need to secure a job has certainly accounted for a fair amount of the useless material that's been published, both as literature and as criticism.

Prospects for Change

Carl Backman (1979) argued, somewhat optimistically I think, that social psychology may already have begun to shift toward what he called the "new paradigm" in psychology, "even though most social psychologists may still think in terms of an earlier one" (p. 301). Backman pointed to the increasing view of the individual as an active agent, to an emphasis on the meaning of events and setting, and to a conception of science focused on models of the structure of interaction--a blend of symbolic interactionism, ethogenic and ethnomethodological influences, and systematic quantification that's moved away from a strict reliance on experimentation.

Backman's views can be related to the point made by Wrigley, that ideological change is often slow change. A first step in loosening psychology's dominant ideology must be to make such change a topic of discussion among psychologists, to break through the pluralistic ignorance that allows those who are dissatisfied with the status quo to continue—erroneously—to think they are alone. One possible method for approaching such a task is to establish within psychology departments discussion groups or seminars to debate these issues, to systematically question psychology's central beliefs. Although such groups are likely to be short-lived, as was one that was instituted last year at Michigan

State (Fox, in press), they do make it impossible to remain unaware of the issues and they do enable change-oriented psychologists to find out who else may have similar perspectives.

Once dissatisfaction is aroused, as political ideologies seek to do, it must be mobilized in order to put pressure on those in power. The most relevant powers here are faculty tenure and search comittees, as well as funding agencies. A major target to begin with must be the use of publication output as the measure of worth (Fox, 1983, 1984; Wachtel, 1980; but see Heesacker, 1984). Such an institutional change is crucial if untenured psychologists are to be able to to have the luxury of sitting down and thinking once in a while instead of madly producing. Such a change is not too likely in the near future, for reasons clearly related to psychologists' role in (and acceptance of) the status quo (Sarason, 1981), but that is no reason to abandon such a worthwhile goal, particularly since such a goal can conceivably be attained within individual departments without the necessity of across-the-board nation-wide consensus. In fact, it might be an interesting research project to randomly assign to a small number of psychology departments the task of changing their tenure standards for a period, say, of ten years. The results might be instructive. Paul Wachtel (1980) proposes a less experimental possibility; he simply suggests that search and tenure committees agree to evaluate no more than three carefully selected published works for any candidate. The development of such a norm, according to Wachtel, could eventually channel psychologists' career mania from quantity to quality, a result with positive benefits for all.

Although it seems unlikely in the increasingly cut-throat mid-1980s, undergraduate students should be considered a natural ally in the struggle to make at least some of the necessary changes in academic psychology--particularly those related to the preoccupation of assistant professors and teaching

assistants with rapid research and publication. Many students reasonably prefer that their instructors spend more time on their teaching than they now can afford to do; more time spent on classroom preparation and on greater interaction with students might result in more thinking about wider issues of relevance on the part of both students and teachers. Many students do assume that their teachers are at the university in order to teach, and their disillusionment upon learning the truth about the minimal impact of teaching on tenure decisions might, if mobilized, serve as a source of additional institutional pressure.

I don't know, of course, exactly how to bring these changes about, but I do think they are necessary. Those of us who seek to change the university and the field of psychology as well as the outside social system need to work together in order to move in the direction of change. Minority views can have an impact, as the experimental research on minority influence makes clear (Moscovici & Nemeth,1974; Nemeth, 1979), but the proponents of those views must be organized, consistent, and outspoken in order to achieve meaningful change.

As we seek to change institutions, we can also try to make some changes on our own, so long as we remember that our resorting to some ultimate faith in our own individual efforts is an approach clearly grounded in our American individualistic person-centered ideology. Still, within the existing institutional framework, we can try to broaden our research methods, to interview our subjects once in a while, to vary our class formats and resist large lectures that are so focused on experimentally derived "facts" that personal relevance is lost. We can think about our own political assumptions and how they affect the practice of our psychology, and about how psychologists of different political persuasions might look at things differently. We can invite sociologists or philosophers to our seminars and to our classrooms to

provide alternative explanations for the phenomena we investigate (just as we can solicit invitations from them to go to their turf).

None of these things will bring radical change, but they are a start in the right direction. As psychologists interested in social change, in making the world a better place as part of the attempt to avoid its destruction, we might find our task a little easier if we also sought to change our profession and retain those students who, as sociologists Robert Bogdan and Stephen Taylor (1975, p. 223) put it,

> are not lured . . . by the kind of work that appears in professional social science journals and publications. Although the culture of the university makes it difficult to admit it, many come with the desire to understand their world and to make it better. These "do-gooders," along with the "journalist types," are intimidated by the academic world and the culture of the social sciences. This attitude must change if social science is to take an important role in the university or in society.

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